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Editorial

PRINCIPLES vs. RULES AND PRECEDENTS

One of the greatest *desiderata* in present-day Christian thinking is a general and clear recognition of the supremacy of the fundamental moral principles of the Bible over all the statutes and usages in which they have found more or less temporary expression. Once and again when great moral issues have been at stake, even those who did not fully admit this general law have found a way to make principle superior to statutes and precedents. But the lesson once learned has been too soon forgotten. New problems have to be settled anew, and the principle involved requires not only to be reapplied, but often also to be learned anew.

HOW THE QUESTION OF SLAVERY WAS SOLVED

A generation ago the people of the country were confronted by the question whether domestic slavery should continue. From the point of view of the theology of the time it was a difficult problem, and both sides appealed to Scripture. The Old Testament, though seeking to mitigate the evils of slavery, did not prohibit, but expressly permitted, it. Jesus, though teaching the principle of the brotherhood of men, is not recorded as having spoken any express word against slavery. The apostle Paul sent a fugitive slave back to his master, and definitely enjoined slaves to be obedient to their masters and not to seek their freedom even if they had the opportunity. Existing institutions, he held, were not to be disturbed, but only to be permeated with the Christian spirit. In the controversies of a half-century ago these facts were forcibly urged in favor of slavery and against all efforts to abolish it. Nevertheless slavery was abolished, and the conscience of the country is today practically unanimous in

its approval of the act of abolition. The moral ideals of the gospel conquered. The essential spirit of Christianity, demanding that even the ignorant black man should have the privilege of independent action so dear to the white man, triumphed over all the arguments from the express teaching of the Old Testament and of the apostle Paul, and from the silence of Jesus. Not only so, but devout men gave their lives, and devout women their husbands and sons, to defend a conviction which, on the basis on which they were wont to reason in respect to other matters, they ought to have rejected as unscriptural. Slavery was of course not the sole issue in the Civil War of 1861–65. But it played an important part in it, and the Christian church of the northern states, by almost unanimously condemning it, committed itself to the principle that ethical questions are to be settled by the great fundamental Christian principle of love applied to existing situations rather than by the example of ancient worthies or by statutes which aimed to apply the principle of love to conditions prevailing in the ancient world.

THE QUESTION OF POLYGAMY

Polygamy furnishes another example of the same method of reaching an ethical judgment. The Old Testament countenances polygamy, and good men of Old Testament times practiced it. The New Testament has no explicit word on the matter, save the stipulation that the bishop shall be the husband of one wife. The Mormons have until recently not only practiced but definitely approved polygamy. But the conscience of Christians generally has condemned it, and for the manifest reason that experience shows that it is inconducive to the development of the highest type of home life, and so tends to corrupt human society at its very fountain. The method of Jesus, which is to base social ethics on the facts of social need, and the principle of Jesus, which is to subordinate personal preference to common welfare, has again been supreme in the face of Old Testament precedent and New Testament silence.

WHAT THIS MEANS APPLIED TO TEMPERANCE

It would be a happy thing for us if this principle had become a vital and permanent part of our Christianity. It would, for example, furnish us a firm basis for the solution of what is commonly called

the temperance question. The Old Testament reprobates drunkenness, but does not, uniformly at least, condemn the use of wine. All attempts to extract from it a consistent testimony against all use of wine, whether by a theory of two kinds of wine or otherwise, have been unsuccessful. Nor is the case essentially different with the New Testament. Drunkenness is strongly condemned and self-control is enjoined. But nowhere is wine-drinking expressly forbidden. Historical criticism may indeed throw doubt on the Pauline authorship of the passage containing the advice to Timothy, and question the historicity of the narrative of the conversion of the water into wine at Cana. But, aside from the fact that such criticism would be, for most of those who might be tempted to use it, a two-edged blade, it leaves us, even taken at its full value, with no explicit condemnation in the New Testament of wine-drinking as such.

What, then, shall we say? Must the case be given to the "United Societies," or whatever organization may favor the drinking of intoxicating liquors? By no means; least of all on these grounds. There may be doubt as to the precise teaching of Paul or practice of Jesus. But there is no doubt that both Jesus and Paul taught that in all of a man's life he should be governed by the great principle of love to one's neighbor—regard for his well-being equally with one's own. Nor is there any doubt that that principle is the basis on which a human life must be built if it is to be well built, and human society developed if it is to be soundly and strongly developed. In the circumstances that exist in this land and today, the saloon is a menace to the well-being of the nation, and ought to be abolished. As respects the use of intoxicants by the individual, there may be room for discussion whether self-control, which is every man's duty, also means for every man total abstinence. But there can be no doubt that for the man to whom the use of alcoholic liquors carries with it an immediate injury or serious risk of begetting a harmful habit, no argument derived from the New Testament or based on its principles can justify the use of such liquors. Nor can anyone who has learned and accepted the principles of the religion of Jesus be indifferent to the danger that to drink at all, even without excess and without danger of excess, may indirectly contribute to drunkenness in others. America is not Palestine, and the conditions of life

in America in the twentieth century are very different from those in Palestine in the first century. Principles are permanent, but their applications change. To plead the example of Jesus or the silence of the New Testament on this particular matter as against the requirements of the central principle of the consideration of the well-being of others is to contradict the spirit of Jesus, and to repeat the mistake of those who were careful for the mint, anise, and cummin, while neglecting the weightier matters, justice and mercy and faithfulness.

THE APPLICATION OF THE PRINCIPLE TO THE SABBATH

The Sabbath furnishes another problem, which though markedly different in some respects from those previously named requires to be dealt with on the same principles. The Old Testament contains a very strict Sabbath law, in which the prophets also for substance concur. The scribes of the post-exilic and New Testament period still further accentuated its strictness. Jesus not only dissented from this later legalistic view, but going beneath even the Old Testament prophets and law, and recognizing that ultimate value lies not in institutions or days, but in men, made the Sabbath an instrument of human welfare, to be administered and controlled from this point of view. The apostle Paul, finding the Sabbath a prominent element of that legalism which to him was the subversion of the gospel, placed it in the same category with circumcision, insisting that no one had the right to impose it upon the Gentile conscience. Are we, then, forbidden to keep the Sabbath? By no means. It is quite within the competence of the Christian community to determine whether the setting of one day in seven apart from the other six contributes to human welfare, and if so, how it shall be distinguished from the others. On this question the experience of the centuries is decisive. We do need, all of us, a weekly interruption in the round of toil, and we do well to make one day in seven a day of physical and mental rest, of spiritual inspiration and uplift. A Sabbath is more necessary than the apostle Paul apparently supposed. But that does not restore for us the Old Testament statute, or substitute for it any new *statute*. The words of Jesus sum up the whole truth on the matter—"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath; therefore the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath." And

he has given us no statute concerning it, but only the great principle of love to guide in this as in other matters. When, therefore, in the interest of the community and of every member of it, we by common consent set apart one day in seven, and then make use of this day, as circumstances demand, in whatsoever way will most promote human welfare, we are following the teaching and example of Jesus.

THE PRINCIPLE OF LOVE OF UNIVERSAL APPLICABILITY

The same rule holds in the whole range of moral conduct. Paradoxical as it may seem, for the Christian, bound though he is by the principles of the New Testament itself to obey the laws of the nation, state, and city, there are no biblical statutes, old or new, no precedents, permissive or prohibitive. But there is one great principle running like a thread of gold through the Old Testament and the New Testament, central in the teaching of Jesus, incarnate in his life, dominant in the life of Paul, never since the first century more clearly perceived than today, now and always demanding allegiance from all men. This great principle of love to one's neighbor is applicable to every situation to which life gives rise. To apply it rightly requires a sensitive conscience and enlightened perception. Honest men may honestly differ as to what its application involves in a given set of circumstances. But it is vain to appeal from it to statute or precedent. For the Christian, love is the final arbiter. This it is that Jesus taught the world.